

# Leadership behavior of Dutch primary school leaders: How does their behavior contribute to the effectiveness of their schools?

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## Introduction

School leaders are held accountable for their student achievements even though most studies find that school leadership does not have a direct effect. Our study tested a number of hypotheses that relate primary school leadership to student achievement in indirect ways. In addition to employing a survey, we observed the real-life behavior of highly effective school leaders and less effective school leaders; we filmed the behavior of 20 primary school directors/leaders, each in one pre-scheduled, regular meeting with their teachers. A new coding scheme based on extant (educational) leadership theory plus the behavioral software “The Observer” enabled us to analyze the films, sentence for sentence. Our results further detail as well as go beyond the transformational, transactional and educational leadership paradigm.

The eleven exclusive behaviors we have defined and coded/analysed were mostly based upon the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire from Bass & Avolio [1], House [2,3] and Pearce [4]. These observed behaviors are further improved by Wilderom & Van der Weide [5,6]:

1. showing disinterest
2. defending one's own position
3. providing negative feedback
4. directing
5. verifying
6. structuring the conversation
7. informing
8. visioning
9. intellectual stimulation
10. individual consideration
11. active listening

Although one of the main reasons for conducting this video-observation study was the indirectness of questionnaire studies, behavioral observation studies might benefit from combining video-taping methods with the more traditional leadership research methods like questionnaires. Hence, apart from our behavioural videotaping, we surveyed perceived educational leadership in terms of the following three dimensions, based upon the studies of Hendrikse, Doolaard, Lam & Bosker [7]:

1. scheduled meetings (we used 11 items)
2. professionalizing (we used 14 items)
3. educational leadership (we used 14 items)

The research into transformational leadership in educational settings was initiated by Leithwood [8,9,10,11,12] and his colleagues from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Toronto, Canada) in the late eighties and early nineties.

Leithwood's survey research concerns not only the nature of transformational school leadership but also the internal process of transformational school leaders and the effect of such leadership on the school. With regard to internal processes of transformational school leaders, Leithwood & Stager [13] report high levels of problem-solving expertise. The results of Leithwood's studies into the nature of school leadership (based on the aforementioned work of Burns and Bass) have revealed specific dimensions of transformational school leadership and behaviors associated with each of these dimensions. In addition we employed these three dimensions of transformational leadership, as they were the most relevant in our filmed context. The survey items we used are based upon the studies of Slegers & Geijssels [14].

1. Charisma/inspiration/vision which means inspiring teachers to be engaged in their work by developing, identifying, and articulating a particular vision;
2. Individual consideration which means concern and respect for the personal feelings and needs of teachers; and
3. Intellectual stimulation which means challenging teachers to professionalize themselves in such a manner that the organization is learning as a whole

## Data collection issues

A data-collection issue in the video-study pertains to the perspective of the camera. In principle there are two possibilities: the etic and the emic view [15]. The emic view refers to the situation where the researcher is participating in the social context to get a view from the inside-out. The converse, etic view – as used during our study – enables the observation of school leader behavior from the outside. This technique was useful so as to obtain a more objective view of the social reality/ situation. For an etic view study it is important that the video camera is located at a fixed place and forms a part of the background [16,17], thus reducing the level of obtrusiveness [18]. An additional advantage is that all videos are recorded from the same position. Hence, the person operating the camera has less freedom of movement thus keeping his or her intrusion as limited as possible.

Another key issue is that of reactivity. Once people know they are being observed, or as soon they come into contact with one another, there will be a certain degree of so-called ‘reactivity.’ People behave differently in a group than when they are alone, or as Goffman [19], puts it: “Thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole.” As such, the level of reactivity is affected by the social value of the behavior. Behavior that is negatively valued (e.g., verbal abuse) will occur less frequently during an observation than socially desirable behavior. A research subject can more or less decide to perform specific behavior during the observational period [20,21]. Field experiments still have to consider reactivity, yet, in experiments, subjects are

not studied in their 'natural' surroundings. In addition, in a laboratory experiment subjects are more reflective toward their behaviors than in their own habitat.

For a field study like ours there are three most common strategies to minimize any possible reactivity. The first one is unobtrusiveness. Yet for practical and ethical reasons, installing hidden video cameras in multiple organizations for observing multiple managers is a bridge too far. Another strategy is manipulation: by withholding the real purpose of the study from the research subject and offering alternative reasons. However, from an ethical point-of-view it is of utmost importance to correctly inform and treat the research subjects [22,23]. Hence, we promised the school leaders that the material would only be used for scientific purposes. For these reasons we chose to follow the third strategy, which is that of acclimatization. Enough time in the field can make the researcher less visible – and hence non-reactive – in the setting so that the normal flow of activities can resume [24]. Therefore, data has only been collected after the research subject has accustomed to the presence of the video camera. First, we explained to the school leaders and their teachers what we were going to do. Then, right before starting the recording, we met for half an hour with the research participants to get acquainted and to answer any questions. This was all useful so as to help the participants to become familiar with the video camera setting [25].

Furthermore, the role of the researcher needs to be articulated [26]. In our study this was crystallized in the role of the camera operator. Previous studies showed that the role of the researcher was seen as vague and mysterious [26]. We endeavored to ensure that the participants would not attribute a negative role to the camera operator. Also, by being present during the entire meeting, the researcher could gather an in-depth feeling of the meeting and its context.

We chose to use one camera; using multiple cameras would have made the field research far more complex [27]. The camera was always put in the same clearly visible location, to add to a trusting relationship between the researchers and his subjects. According to Kent and Foster [18], behavioral observation procedures, making use of videotaping, usually seem to be largely unobtrusive and unaffected by the expectations of the examiner. The use of the camera is perhaps even less obtrusive than writing down field notes as it causes less anxiety and curiosity among the subjects. A camera does not give feedback to specific behaviors (reciprocity); rather it continuously, carefully, and reliably observes behavior. Furthermore, the camera was solely directed at the school leaders, thus further lowering the reactivity of their "followers." Hence, the role of the researcher in all of the video-recording in this study and the position of the camera were carefully chosen as to have as little reactivity as possible. As school directors and their teachers refrained from asking unnecessary questions related to the filming, our method seems quite unobtrusive.

## Data analyses of the video-study

After converting the videotapes into so-called MPEG data files, we were able to codify the behaviors of the school leaders. We used the behavioral-software program 'The Observer,' which saved a considerable amount of time otherwise required for transcription [28,26]. 'The Observer' also allowed us to watch and code the video images at the same time with help of a behavioral coding scheme. These codes were registered and resulted in a separate data file for every one-on-one meeting and department meeting. In an effort to make the coding work easier, we listed the coding

scheme of eighteen behaviors in a friendliness order, rating managers' behaviors from very empathic to very self-interested.

Two observers worked on coding the data collected in our sample. These coders were thoroughly trained in the behavioral coding scheme [29]. The thoroughness of the coding is made apparent by the amount of time required: each minute of video required an average of three minutes to code. Two observers separately coded the same video images. The two observers then reviewed the coding differences together [18,30]. We used inter-rater reliability as an indicator of need for standardization of the coding scheme [31,32]. The measure we used to establish inter-rater reliability is the percentage of agreement among the raters (i.e., 'the percentage of raters who agree to a specific code for a given section of the recording').

In our presentation we will link the obtained behavioral results of the study to the survey results: the survey was administered among the attendees of each filmed meeting: right after each filming session.

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